

The Mirabella Monthly

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A SPECIAL PLACE, PART 1

BY IDA CURTIS

Editor's Note: The author's backward look at annual visits to a much-loved cottage-by-the-sea was written several years ago to fix in print memories that tend to fade all too soon. The second and third parts will appear in subsequent issues.

IN JANUARY OF 1993 an advertisement for a summer cottage on the Connecticut seashore caught my eye. I was reading a magazine called *Accent on Living* that someone introduced me to many years earlier when it was still called *Polio Living*. At the time, Jared and I lived in Vancouver, British Columbia, but my mother still lived in Connecticut where I grew up. Since she didn't enjoy flying across the country to visit us, I thought it would be nice for us to spend a vacation near her.

Not trusting that the cottage would be wheelchair accessible, I asked her to check it out. Well aware of my needs, she visited the site and reported enthusiastically that it was suitable. She described the cottage, warning that it was very old.

"It has a lot of bedrooms, two large bathrooms, and is right on the sandy beach," she said.

"How many is a lot of bedrooms?" I asked.

"I lost count. Enough. Did I say it's right on the beach?" she repeated.

Impressed, I called the owner and rented the cottage for two weeks in July, and since it



Alling Cottage, Pine Orchard, CT

CASCADE BEAT

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had “a lot of bedrooms,” we invited my brother and his wife, who lived in California, to join us for the first week.

Jared and I flew to Connecticut, rented a car at the airport, and followed my mother’s careful instructions on how to find the cottage in Pine Orchard. We located it easily and parked our car in the wide paved driveway beside the cottage. Once we were free of the car, our first sight of the dark blue water and the smell of the salt air captured our attention, and we stared out to sea for some time. We could see a few islands in the distance and later learned that there were over one hundred Thimble Islands, some no more than a large rock.

Our attention turned at last to the red clapboard cottage with white trim around its many doors and windows. I was relieved to see a ramp leading up to a wide porch that ran along the side and front of the building. In front, facing the beach, the porch was covered by the continuation of the roof. I could already see myself sitting there, protected from the sun or rain, staring out to sea when not reading, writing, or doing needlework.

The owner had said the door would be open and we eagerly set out to explore.

The front room was a large open space with a

living/dining room on one side and a kitchen on the other. Behind a long, high counter that separated the areas were all the necessary kitchen appliances and a table for food preparation facing out the window to the sea. The table was low and perfect for someone using a wheelchair to roll up to and under.

Beyond the kitchen counter, each side of the fireplace, were two long couches, piled with pillows. They faced each other across a coffee table. Separated by enough space to walk through to the side door was the dining area. A long wooden table and a dozen chairs were set in front of the windows looking out to Long Island Sound.



Ida's mother, Fanny, enjoying the sun at Pine Orchard

From the front room a long hall led down the middle of the building with bedrooms on each side. We had been puzzled to see so many doors along the outside of the cottage, and we now realized that each bedroom had its own entrance. Much later we learned that the cottage had been an annex built over a hundred years earlier

to house overflow guests from a luxury hotel that had since disappeared. We supposed that some of the bedrooms had been converted to the living space at the front, and a second kitchen and living room at the end of the hall. Sliding-glass doors, very different from the old wooden doors,

BUILDING AROUND MIRABELLA

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had been added for the common areas, front and back. In all there were five bedrooms, two kitchens, two living rooms, and two bathrooms. No wonder my mother couldn't remember how many bedrooms she had seen.

After picking out our bedroom and unloading the car, Jared and I followed a path, past two small sailboats, to the back of the property. Bob Alling, the owner, lived in a much smaller cabin. My mother had told us he used a wheelchair, and we found a short ramp to his door. Bob welcomed us, telling us to make use of the sailboats we had passed. I guessed Bob to be at least ten years older than we, and he seemed pleased to be renting to someone who also used a wheelchair. He told us where to find the large grocery stores in nearby Branford, as well as the much smaller store a few blocks away where prepared dishes and sandwiches were available. Jared later walked to this deli to pick up breakfast supplies, as well as salads for supper that first night. Tired, we settled into bed early and let the lovely rolling of the surf lull us to sleep. It was a soothing sound we never tired of.

In the morning we made breakfast and were still eating our cereal on the front porch when we heard a car arrive. "Good morning," Mom called

as she rounded the corner of the cottage. "Is there enough coffee for me?"

Of course, there was. The Hartford Courant newspaper was folded under her arm and, after I skimmed through it, Mom and I settled down to do the crossword puzzle together. When we got stuck on a hard word, we'd call Jared for help.

And the newspaper was not her only offering. That first year, and each succeeding year, she would bring a tin of oatmeal raisin cookies for Jerry (as she always called Jared). These were

his favorites, and my favorite, chocolate chip, never appeared. Other guests discovered the tin, of course, and, when it was empty, Mom took it away and refilled it "for Jerry." Everyone loved the cookies, and I tried to duplicate them years later. I had discovered her secret, which was to grind the raisins with an old fashion meat grinder she attached to a table. I tried grinding them in a small food

processor, which didn't produce the same effect, and I was never able to match those special cookies.

Part II, coming in May, will focus on the many visitors—family members, friends, and friends of friends—who helped enliven the many Pine Orchard holidays. Editor.



*Ida and her cousins Pat and Joan
on the front porch of the cottage at Pine Orchard*

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A SPECIAL PLACE, PART 2

BY IDA CURTIS

The cottage on the beach at Pine Orchard became much more than a place to Ida Curtis, as she reveals in this second installment of her reminiscence of holidays past. Editor.

MY mother's early morning arrival at the beach-side retreat began a routine that was repeated many times during the first eleven years we rented the cottage. Although she occasionally slept in one of the many bedrooms, I think she preferred to return home at night. She loved driving her Honda Accord for the fifty-minute trip between her home in Hartford and Pine Orchard. When the cottage was full of family, as it often was, she'd disappear during the afternoon, returning early the next morning while visitors were still asleep. Most of the overnight visitors were family. Because we all lived so far from each other, Pine Orchard gave us the chance we would not otherwise have had to see each other. As I mentioned, my brother and his wife stayed with us the first week, and members of their family visited while Brud and Pat were there. They were company for me because, for the first few summers at Pine Orchard, Jared visited nearby libraries several days in the week, sometimes bringing colleagues home with him to enjoy a break from their scholarly research. Jared's older brother Ron and his wife Frances, who didn't live far away, came often, usually staying for the day. Ron, tall and slim, was into extreme physical activities such as karate, in which he earned a black belt, and mountain climbing. An avid sailor, too, he enjoyed taking out the landlord's sunfish, either with Jared or on his own. When Jared was away, Ron would disappear for hours behind the Thimble Islands, and we had to give up worrying about him.

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Meanwhile, Frances and I enjoyed sitting on the porch, mostly talking and watching the activity on the water. If we decided we needed a little exercise, we'd walk past the neighboring Country Club's marina and nine-hole golf course to an area of a number of stately homes. Since they all faced the ocean, their large garages lined the quiet and walkable lanes. These homes differed from our rental cottage, which was not only much older, but had not been kept up and showed its age. We seldom saw evidence of visitors to these homes during the week, but on Friday night cars with New York license plates crowded the driveways and the lanes. Frances and I wondered what it would be like to have a large house that you mostly used on weekends in the summer.

In contrast, our cottage fairly jumped with activity all week long. Edward, Jared's younger brother, lived in Pennsylvania, and he and his wife Joyce arrived with their two daughters. Jessie and Jodie were eight and six the first year they came, and their visits over the years allowed us to watch the girls grow. By the final three years they were bringing boyfriends. The favorite activity of these girls involved walking the beach, collecting shells, and visiting the rocks that formed a breakwater a quarter mile away. Mostly I suspect they enjoyed escaping the eyes of the adults.



Ida and her cousins Pat and Joan enjoying the front porch

Unlike Ron, Ed strenuously avoided exercise, with the exception of carrying in the many bags from their large van. However, he was enthusiastic about crossword puzzles. On Sundays, he'd be off in search of a newspaper that carried the Merl Reagle puzzle. Ed allowed me to help him with the Reagle, despite not really needing my assistance. He and Joyce did a lot of the food shopping, which was much appreciated. In addition, Joyce cooked many of the main meals during their visits.

On looking back through travel journals, I found we rented the same cottage for fourteen summers, plus two Thanksgivings. Usually we spent two weeks there in June, although one summer after

we retired from our jobs, we stayed for a month. During those years, from 1993 to 2008, we missed two summers, 2004 and 2005, when my mother moved to a nursing home in Seattle. After Mom passed away, we returned in 2006 and the two following years. By 2008, our last year at Pine Orchard, Bob Alling had died, and his son inherited

the cottage. He decided to renovate it, and as far as we know it never became available again. Although we didn't rent again, that special place lives on in our memory, especially during the month of June. Although I think of my mother, as she dropped in most often, Jared's mother was also a frequent visitor. His father had passed

RAIN CITY RIDERS

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away much earlier, but Ann, who lived in Florida, continued to travel, often visiting friends, but also exploring foreign destinations. Sometimes Ann would come to Pine Orchard with Ed and Joyce, with whom she spent a lot of time. Like my mother, Ann remained active even in her eighties. Her passion was dancing, and she surprised us one year by bringing her dancing partner and boyfriend, Tony, to Pine Orchard.

Family reunions took place each year we were there. My mother had two sisters, Helen and Edith, who lived nearby, and they visited together at least three times. Each sister had a daughter, and in the last three years we cousins also had reunions, posing for pictures that mirror earlier ones of our mothers. Joan, Edith's daughter, lived not far from Pine Orchard, and even after our last year Joan sent me news items from local papers about the Thimble Islands.

My cousin Pat, Helen's daughter, was an early and frequent visitor, as she and my mother had become close friends. Pat travelled from Rhode Island and would often stay the night in one of our many bedrooms, especially if my mother was going to be there. Pat and I became close during those years and now keep in touch by Skyping each other, often comparing weather on opposite coasts, as well as sharing news about cousin Joan and other family matters.

The large cottage, with its many bedrooms, enabled family reunions that otherwise would have been difficult. But there were other visitors as well. My two best friends from high school, Kathleen and Joan, came almost every year, and one year they brought three other classmates with them. Most of these reunions were spent on the porch catching up with family news and drinking various cocktails. After the first year,

when Joan arrived and found only Ed's beer in our refrigerator, she'd arrive with a cooler that held the makings for more appropriate drinks. You could always count on Joan to think ahead.

In the final part of "A Special Place," to appear in June's issue, Ida will tell of one visitor who made an impression out of all proportion to his size and touch on the annual efforts the Curtises made to keep the century-old cottage in functioning order. Editor.

THE EMERALD CITY RIDE

By David Webber

IT WAS a dark and stormy morning. Cold, rainy, strong gusty wind. Paul Keown and David Webber met as agreed at the Mirabella garage bike rack at 6 am to ride to the starting line near Safeco Field. Mission: ride the Emerald City Bike Ride, north on the 99 Viaduct, through the Battery Street tunnel, across the Ship Canal Bridge, then through Fremont to access the I-5 express lanes southbound, and back to the start. We rode up to Stewart and Second, then down the much-maligned bike lanes to Second Avenue



Emerald City Riders Idamay Curtis and Jenny Goldberg on the 99 Viaduct

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A SPECIAL PLACE, PART 3

BY IDA CURTIS

The third and final part of Ida's memoir of her "special place" gives a last glimpse of her idyllic beach cottage on the Connecticut shore. Editor

ONCE we established the pattern of spending two weeks in June at Pine Orchard, there were tons of visitors who often overlapped. As someone once remarked, "If you rent it, they will come." (I think it was me.) It was not unusual for there to be fourteen for dinner, and I noticed while reading my journals that our son Randy often broiled swordfish or steamed lobsters for large groups. Other people took their turns at making salads or desserts. The food always tasted delicious; maybe it was the sea air that flavored it.

In my journals I found some names I couldn't identify. Who were Bo and Linda who usually came when Randy and Amy were there? And one time, Pat came with Mel? Filling in my memory blanks, Randy told me that Bo was a professor at nearby Yale. He and Linda were his friends. Pat informed me that Mel was a dog she was baby-sitting for a friend who was moving. I blame my poor memory on the vast number of visitors. But who could remember them all?

There was one visitor I'll never forget. Towards the end of our stay in 2007, Jared woke up to the sound of rustling in the kitchen. He got up to check, and I heard a loud and shocked, "God Damn It." After rushing back to the bedroom and shutting the door, he muttered as he pulled on his pants, "There's a skunk out there."

"Are you sure? Maybe it's Bob's cat," I suggested, trying to calm him. With narrowed eyes, he looked at me and said, "It's not a cat." Then he rushed out of the bedroom, again closing the door and leaving me to wonder if I had been abandoned.

Jared had gone to see Bob, the owner and source of all necessary

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information. Bob called his “skunk guy,” who appeared about fifteen minutes later in a noisy truck. His guy proceeded to set up a skunk trap in the hallway and formed a chute with couch pillows, so he could quietly and slowly direct the skunk into the trap. Jared was watching from as far away as he could and still be in the cottage. Whatever the trap contained tempted the skunk into it, and since there was no room in the trap to raise his tail, no bad smell was emitted.

Bob paid the skunk guy his seventy-five dollars and he left. When I asked what he’d do with the skunk, now feeling a little sorry for the creature, Jared speculated that he’d release it somewhere nearby and soon earn another seventy-five bucks from a neighbor.

The skunk had entered the cottage through a front screen door that was loosely fitted to a frame that didn’t lock. The aging cottage had a personality but wasn’t secure. Each year we noticed changes and found some repair that needed to be done. Even the first year Jared had to purchase a silicon spray to make the glass door slide easily enough for me to open it. In the following years we’d find that the sea air had returned the door to its previous state of sluggishness. Jared would have to search for the can of silicon, often stored in a

different place from where he left it.

But that was a small repair compared to the many others that needed attending.

Bob Alling supervised the first repair job Jared asked to undertake. The door to the bathroom nearest my bedroom was up a small ramp and didn’t open all the way. I repeatedly scraped my knuckles on the way up the little ramp and into the room. Ron, an artist and woodworker, suggested that the hinges be replaced with ones that would allow the

door to open flat against the wall, completely out of my way.

Bob must have appreciated their work; from then on, he always agreed to any repair Jared suggested, never bothering to supervise again. Many torn screens were replaced over the years.

In addition to the small repairs we found necessary, there were often major changes

that had taken place in our absence. We never knew what to expect upon arrival. In the early years the appliances in the back kitchen began to disappear, one by one, until only the refrigerator remained. The Ed Curtises especially missed the extra sink, but we were all glad the second refrigerator remained to store beer, soft drinks, and ice cream. One year we found the rear living room had been made into



Brothers Ron, Jared, and Ed work on the bathroom door while Bob supervises. The building’s many entrances along the side reflect its history as an annex to an inn, now gone, on the hill behind it.

HOUSE INVASIONS

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two small bedrooms. The large back bedroom was closed off and used by the owner for storage.

A few of the changes resulted because of a general lack of upkeep. The railings on the front porch started giving way, probably because people leaned on them. Repairs were made, but the wood was old, and the fixes didn't hold up. One year, Bob must have decided it was easier to take down the railings along the front porch. That was one of the big surprises. For me the view improved, but we had to be careful children didn't fall off the porch. Over the years the large number of renters, including a group of Yale graduates who celebrated there early each June, wore away at the cottage and its furnishings. The many changes never dampened our enthusiasm for the place.

After she passed, we all missed Mom, whose good humor and quiet way charmed everyone. But there now was a new charmer in the cottage: our granddaughter Alice made her first appearance in 2006 when she was two years old. For that year, and the next two years, she swam with her father Randy, collected shells with her mother Amy, and was read to and played with by many visitors. When Uncle

Ron gave his dramatic reading of "The Paper-bag Princess," Alice screeched with laughter. But most of all she delighted her grandparents when they heard her light footsteps as she ran down the long hall each morning to have breakfast with Mimi and PopPop. Her parents enjoyed sleeping in and we enjoyed having her to ourselves.

Pine Orchard was many things: the sound of the surf at night, the pleasure of staring out to sea, the smell of the salt air, the feel of the summer heat, but most of all the opportunity to see family and friends.

A SPECIAL TIME

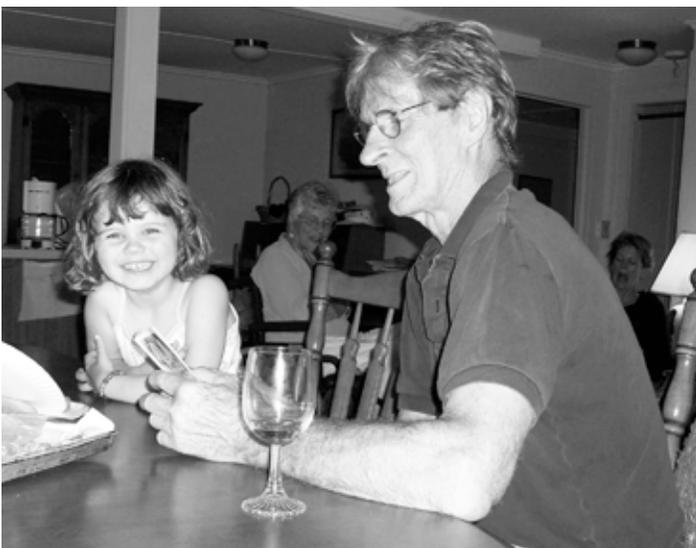
BY ELIZABETH BRET

LOOK! A place to eat up ahead." But my brand-new husband remained hunched over the steering wheel. "When we get to La Playa Hotel we'll have a really great dinner," Frank said. "The manager is a friend of mine."

After our wedding that morning in 1948 in Riverside, California, our wedding breakfast was at the Chick-e-Chick Drive Inn in Los Angeles. We sat at the counter with mechanics from the car agency next door, and when they discovered we were just married, they toasted us with coffee mugs.

Now speeding along and looking at my ring sparkling in the sunlight, I recalled how I found myself in this situation. Frank was the dashing Czech assistant manager of the historic Mission Inn, his first job in America after five years as an RAF pilot during WWII and two years in India working and waiting for his visa.

At the inn, his duties included overseeing the new swimming pool, a novelty for hotels in those days. Citizens of Riverside were excited about this addition to their famous landmark, and it became the gathering spot that summer for lunching and



Alice and her highly entertaining great uncle Ron